***ENLIGHTENED HEARTS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

November 22, 2020

Texts: Ephesians 1:15-23 and Psalm 95:1-7

What a year it has been! 2020 has not turned out to be the wonderful year that we all hoped for when we sang *Auld Lang Syne* last New Year’s Eve and offered well wishes of *Happy New Year*! Had we only known, we might have stopped the ball from dropping in Times Square on New Year’s Eve – or the walleye from dropping that same night in Port Clinton, OH as is their tradition! Perhaps we could have observed a true leap year and skipped straight to 2021 and so avoided the chaos! The year started out okay – unless you were a skier lamenting the lack of snow – and then it went downhill from there (no pun intended); we endured the onset of the coronavirus, and an endless deluge of political ads, and the most active hurricane season in years, and now as this surly year nears its long-awaited end, it is giving us one last blast of rampant COVID surges and a toxic dose of presidential posturing over a lost election. Again and again I hear folks say, “I can’t wait for this year to be over!” which is, in itself, some expression of hope. To all of you who share this hopeful sentiment, I offer this bit of good news: The new year is about to begin, for next Sunday is the beginning of a new year! And you thought you had to wait another month!

Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent, and with the coming of Advent we turn the pageon the liturgical calendar from the old year to a new year, in this case the much-anticipated Year B in the three-year liturgical cycle. Be prepared to welcome friends and family with joyful shouts of “Happy Year B” next week! Add to the list of your Thanksgiving prayers the welcome of a new year and a plea that it be better than this past year! For, a new year is waiting for us just on the other side of Thanksgiving’s turkey. But that is seven days away! Today is the last Sunday of the old year. Is there any good news for this day and this year, apart from looking ahead to the year to come? Put another way, for what will you give thanks at the table on ***this*** year’s Thanksgiving Day?

Our friend Jim Simpson told us of a minister in Scotland who began his prayers each week with some comment about the weather. *Lord, we thank you for this glorious day. Lord, we thank you for the freshening breeze. Lord, we thank you for the gentle rain that waters the earth.* On one particularly cold, wet, raw, miserable day the folks in the pews were anxious to hear what he could possibly say about that day in his prayer. He began: *Lord, we thank you that every day is not like today.* Perhaps that is how our Thanksgiving prayers should begin this week: *Lord, we thank you that every year is not like this year!* But where do we go from there?

When the pilgrims landed in Plymouth after their arduous voyage across the Atlantic they expressed their thanks for the providence of God that had brought them safely to the New World. As one account describes it:

*Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed ye God of heaven, who had brought them over ye vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all periles & miseries thereof, againe to set their feete on ye firme and stable earth…*

Life had been unstable and precarious on that voyage; they had longed to put their feet on solid ground, and when they did, they immediately thanked God for that great gift. Daunting challenges still lay ahead in the new land, but in the moment of their arrival, as they came ashore and planted their feet on stable land for the first time in months, they recognized that God’s hand had been with them all along the way, and they expressed gratitude for it. Perhaps that is something we can learn from them for our Thanksgiving prayers as well – to give thanks for God’s providential hand that has brought us safely to this point through this year.

We are not unrealistic about the challenges that lie ahead of us in the new year until vaccines are widely available and widely administered and the electoral crisis is resolved, but we recognize that God has been with us through the perils and miseries of this challenging year. Our God is not a fair-weather God who abandons us when life is difficult; God is with us through thick and thin – there to sustain us and to comfort us and to lead us on faithful paths. The real question is: Are we fair-weather Christians, thankful to God only when life is good and suffering is minimal and our blessings fill us to overflowing? Can you find silver linings in the clouds of this past year and thank God for those small blessings? We do not hesitate to cry out to God when life is bad and getting worse, and plea for God to deliver us and make things right. But can we find blessings for which to give thanks to God, not only with the dawn of a bright new day, but also in the dark of a stormy, viral night?

Psalm 95 that I read a few moments ago offers a template for such praise.

*O come, let us sing to the Lord;*

*let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!*

*Let us come into God’s presence with thanksgiving!*

*For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods!*

The psalmist recognizes God’s creative hand and sovereign rule over all the earth and over all other rulers and deities. Like the pilgrims who gave thanks for God’s hand that guided and sustained them across the Atlantic, the psalmist sings of God’s greatness as Creator and ruler of all things and all people in all places, but also as the One who has claimed us as God’s people in a particular way:

*The Lord is our God, and we are the people of God’s pasture,*

*and the sheep of God’s hand.*

That image of the shepherd is a royal image, acknowledging our lives lived under the rule of a God who guards us and provides for our every need. Yet the psalmist knows we are prone to rebel against divine rule. *O that today you would listen to God’s voice*, he pleads, which suggests that the very people who were the sheep of God’s hand were ignoring that voice and turning a deaf ear to God’s guidance.

O that today WE would listen to God’s voice. O that today we would set aside the partisan rancor that has divided families and friends in this nation and seek to be reconciled to one another and resolve instead to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God! O that we would repent of the impatient selfishness that dares to satisfy our own wants, desires, and conveniences at the expense of keeping ourselves and others safe in this pandemic! O that today we would not only acknowledge our blessings but also recognize the responsibilities that go with them! O that today we would listen to God’s voice! If we do not hear God’s voice, maybe it is because we are paying attention to a cacophony of other voices these days; or maybe God’s voice is being drowned out by our own whining about the current state of the world. Perhaps, if we silence those distracting voices and are still – for a moment or two or three – really still in the midst of the whirlwind of the world and know that God is God and we are not, as the psalmist says, then we may hear the reassuring voice of the Lord whispering, “Do not fear. I am with you. You are mine. You are blessed in order that you may be a blessing.”

Maya Angelou once said: *“If you must look back, do so forgivingly. If you must look forward, do so prayerfully. However, the wisest thing you can do is be present in the present…gratefully.”[[1]](#endnote-1)* Perhaps this day, this week, we might follow her suggestion and try living in the present gratefully – neither ruing and reliving the disasters of the year past or anxiously anticipating the year to come, but simply living in the present with gratitude for the blessings it offers, even if they are not all the blessings we long for.

The writer to the Ephesians would describe that attitude as an “enlightened heart”. That is the expression he uses in his prayer for the Christians in the fledgling church in Ephesus:

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.*

An enlightened heart recognizes God’s hand at work in our midst, acknowledges God’s blessings, and embraces God’s promises. ***Hope*** to which we are called, ***riches*** of God’s glorious gift of faith, the ***greatness*** of God’s power – recognition of these mark the enlightened heart that sees God’s hand at work in the world every day. It is the enlightened heart that dares to hope in the midst of difficulty and disaster, the enlightened heart that is ever grateful for God’s blessings, the enlightened heart that trusts God’s power to overcome any evil or virus or difficulty we may face, the enlightened heart that confidently sings, *All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name*. For at the heart of an enlightened heart is the recognition of God’s loving, gracious rule over all of creation, over all our lives, and over each of our lives as well.

At the end of this bizarre year, as you sit down to feast on whatever feast you may be feasting upon this Thanksgiving Day, pause for a moment or two or three to give thanks – for the blessings which you have received, the blessings you are receiving, and the blessings you will yet receive from the hand of God who is walking with you each step of the way. With enlightened hearts give thanks to the God who, as Paul says, fills all in all. And may you be so filled – filled with love, filled with hope, filled with gratitude, filled with peace – this last week of the year and into the year to come. Amen

1. Maya Angelou quoted by Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, HarperOne:2018, p.67 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)